

Ezekiel 23:38

“Child Sacrifice and Sabbath Violation Set Side-by-Side”

“Again, they have done this to Me: they have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and have profaned My sabbaths.”

A survey of the themes of Ezekiel ch. 23 demonstrates how the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, Oholah and Oholibah respectively (23:1-4), are depicted as two daughters of the Lord who turn into prostitutes. The sins of the Northern Kingdom or Samaria are described first (23:5-10), followed by those of the Southern Kingdom or Jerusalem (23:11-35). **Some of the major sins of both are detailed** (23:36-39). The chapter closes with the explicit reference to Oholah and Oholibah as prostitutes (23:40-45) whom the Lord will most certainly judge (23:46-49).

No reader can easily deny when encountering what appears, how serious the sins which have been committed truly are to God, and how heinous and disloyal He considers them to be. While the crimes of idolatry, murder, and child sacrifice are horrendous to be sure—once again we encounter how violation of the Sabbath is listed right alongside of them:

“Again, this they have done to Me—they defiled My Sanctuary on the same day and **profaned My *Shabbatot*** [*shabbetotai chileilu*, שַׁבְּתוֹתַי הִלְלוּ]. On the same day that they slaughtered their children to their idols, they came into My Sanctuary to profane it. See, that is what they have done within My House!” (23:38-39, TLV).

How significant is it to see that along with idolatry and child sacrifice, that those of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms “desecrated My Sabbaths” (ATS), “My sabbaths they have polluted” (YLT), or “made my sabbaths impure” (Common English Bible)? As abominable as the Israelites worshiping other gods and sacrificing their sons and daughters to them is to the Lord—He is just as displeased with how the institution of His Sabbath has been treated as unholy. For those seeking a wholistic understanding of God’s Word, this serves as a sure indicator of how the Sabbath is not an institution to be trifled with lightly.

What kind of Sabbath desecration might be in view? For sure, either going through the motions of honoring *Shabbat* without any genuine heart motivation, or violation of the Sabbath through conducting business, would be among the options available, especially when encountering other prophetic oracles, such as Amos 8:4-6. That Ezekiel 23:38 depicts the people worshipping at God’s Sanctuary or *miqdash* (מִקְדָּשׁ), profaning His Sabbath, and then in Ezekiel 23:39 going to slaughter their children to idols—specified to be *b’yom ha’hu* (בְּיוֹם הַהוּא) or “on the same day”—there are two major possibilities of what was taking place. Either (1) the people would go to God’s Sanctuary and worship Him, with a tacit Sabbath observance taking place, and then be immediately followed at another location by worship of other deities and their required child sacrifice. Or (2) some kind of syncretistic worship was taking place in God’s Sanctuary of both the Lord and various Canaanite gods and goddesses, where the Sabbath was recognized in some capacity, but also where child sacrifice was a significant feature.

Very few commentators have said that much about the Sabbath violation mentioned in Ezekiel 23:38, mainly because Sabbath violation is addressed in more extensive passages appearing in the Book of Ezekiel. There are, though, a few observations one will

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encounter. Daniel I. Block, for example, indicates how "The links with other passages are...evident in vv. 38-39, as the prophet exposes the twin sins of defiling Yahweh's sanctuary and profaning his Sabbaths (cf. 20:13, 16, 21; 22:8)."¹ Steven Tuell states that "desecration of the Sabbath is a major reason for exclusion from the land in 20:13, 21, 23-24."² Ralph P. Alexander concurs that the mentioning of the Sabbath alongside of worship of the Lord, necessarily implies that this is a desecration which took place on the Sabbath, stating,

"The implication was that these perversions were also performed on the Sabbaths. Thus the Sabbaths were profaned (v.38b; forbidden in Exod 20:8-11; Lev 19:3, 30). In addition the prophets had asserted that the Sabbath was neglected during most of the period of the divided kingdoms."³

Katheryn Pfisterer Darr draws out the presence of personal pronouns in Ezekiel 23:38, noting how God Himself takes offense at what has taken place:

"Note the phrases 'this they have done to *me*' (v. 38a), and the intervening 'my sanctuary,' 'my sabbaths,' 'my sanctuary.' The sisters' sins have direct implications for God, whose holy space and times they recklessly desecrate."⁴

Surely, each one of us as Bible readers is absolutely repulsed when we see descriptions of the Ancient Israelites, of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, degrading and dishonoring themselves by idolatry, murder, and child sacrifice! *So what do we do when we see violation of the institution of the Sabbath listed right alongside these sins?* Many excellent examiners of Holy Scripture gloss over such a reference. Are we repulsed, or at the very least disappointed, when we see that the Sabbath was profaned? Are we at all motivated, as the people of God today, to see what good can be restored to the Body of Messiah by properly honoring and observing the seventh-day of rest established by our Creator? Do we at all try to probe and understand how offended God actually was that His holy day was desecrated?

¹ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 760.

² Tuell, pp 156-157.

³ Alexander, in *EXP*, 6:857.

⁴ Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1329.